

Chapter 651 Balance

The temple was located outside of the main city walls, nestled between hundreds of buildings squished into the narrow line of land between the massive walls and the lake. Plenty of buildings reached onto the water as well, stone pillars and wooden beams supporting the structures with dozens of piers in between.

The lakeside part of town narrowed further towards the north until water touched the city walls. To the south the space broadened instead, a less impressive wall protecting the packed multilayered town against monster attacks. With how massive Virilya truly was, this portion outside its main walls could've been an entire settlement of its own, the walls comparable to those of Riverwatch. And because of the limited space, it seemed the builders had to go vertical instead. There seemed to be a specific height where they hadn't been allowed to continue however, likely to prevent an easier entry past the city walls.

Ilea watched as a few dozen fishing boats sailed onto the expansive lake, a few hundred in total visible from the stairwell she stood on.

"Have you not visited this part of town before?" Julia asked, waiting a few steps ahead.

"No," Ilea answered. "I've seen it from a distance. I've not stayed in the city for longer than a few days at a time."

"Too busy fighting the enemies of humanity," Julia mused.

I wonder what excuse she'd come up with for the Elves.

The Temple looked more like a military fort, other houses of stone and wood built against the stone walls of the Order structure jutting out of the bustling fishing area.

"Why build this temple here instead of inside the walls?" Ilea asked.

"For the view, I suppose," Julia said with a shrug. "No way to see the lake from inside the city."

How many people sign up for the guard just to stand on those walls then? Ilea thought, turning around and looking up. It still seemed imposing to her, despite her ability to fly and everything she'd seen. A testament to magic itself. *And yet a Trakorov could burst through them with a single charge.*

Then again there surely were dozens of enchantments placed on the walls, reinforcing them ten fold or even more. Perhaps it really was enough to stop a four mark creature. Ilea would certainly be interested in stress testing the walls of Virilya and Ravenhall, just to see who would do better. She couldn't see a way for either to stop her Archon Strike coupled with an ashen drill, but there was a chance she'd be surprised. *Might ask Claire about that. She might be interested too.*

"*Wall enchantment stress test? Build test wall if interested,*" she sent to the woman, turning back to Julia and gesturing her to walk ahead.

The fort itself had a large wooden gate, currently open with two imperial guards standing out front. A yard of stone opened up within, dozens of people talking to the healers, some negotiating and moving on to others.

“Like a market for medicine,” Ilea said.

Julia glanced back and smiled. “I suppose it is. And a lot of that money goes back into training new healers or building temples in less wealthy towns all over the Empire and bordering countries.”

“You’re present in all of them?” Ilea asked.

“Most, though mainly the Empire. I suppose our influence here prevents rapid expansion elsewhere,” Julia suggested.

“Makes sense,” Ilea said, greeting a few healers who had done the same to her. Most were below level one hundred even, none of them giving her the impression of an experienced fighter.

They went up a few sets of stairs, Julia leading her into the upper part of the fort where more imperial guards now actively stopped them.

“Don’t have your own guards?” she asked, looking at the healer.

“No reason to be a smart ass,” one of the guards said.

Julia glared at the man. “You’re insulting Lilith, watch your mouth.”

He glanced between them.

“Apologize to her,” Julia demanded.

Ilea waved her off. “It’s fine. I was being a smart ass. So why don’t they have their own guards?”

The other man replied. “Order pays ‘lenty o taxes. An healers can’t exactly protect ‘emselves, can ey?”

[Halberd Fighter – lvl 85]

“I guess they can’t,” Ilea said, blinking a few times as she looked at the man. “Good thing they have you to protect them.”

“Aw piss off, go inside then,” he said and spat on the ground. “Nobilihy.”

“I’m not actually noble, but sure. A good day to you two,” Ilea said and displaced their weapons onto the roof.

“Wha... where,” one of them stuttered, looking around before he left his post in search of his weapon.

Julia giggled next to her. “Shall we?”

She looked ready to fight that man with her bare hands, Ilea thought. “I think I can find the way myself now. Thanks for getting me here, Julia.”

“Oh... alright. Well, good luck in that case. I hope to hear more from you... ah... before... do you maybe want to get lunch later? I know a few good restaurants!” the woman asked, her face taking on a shade of red.

Ilea smiled. “That’s sweet, but I’ve got other business to attend to afterwards. Thanks for the invitation, and good luck with your healing.”

The woman nodded, deflating a little before she straightened and smiled. “Goodbye, Lilith. It was an honor to meet you,” she added and bowed.

“Nice to meet you too, Julia,” Ilea answered and entered the temple. *Well that was awkward.*

She didn’t want to take advantage of the starstruck healer, hoping this wouldn’t become a normal occurrence. *Go Sentinels, get stronger quickly.*

The halls within were mostly empty, one healer walking past but ignoring her after a confused glance.

Ilea found a woman sitting at a desk within the largest room, windows angled in a way that would let her see the lake beyond. She assumed that was the Minister.

A knock on the door made the woman look up. “Yes.”

Ilea looked in from a half opened door. “Minister Genesis?”

“Indeed,” the woman said and locked eyes with her. “And you must be Lilith. Come in.”

Ilea closed the door behind herself and looked around. A few shelves lined the walls, covered not only in books but trinkets, potions, and items giving off various magical auras. A large brown fur of some kind of bear was laid out to the side of the room, a door leading out to a terrace overlooking the port and lake beyond.

[Barrier Mage – lvl 285]

The woman herself looked to be in her fifties, which only meant she reached a high level at that point in her life. She could’ve been hundreds if not thousands of years old. Gray hair bound in a single bun adorned her head, a slightly armored dark gray robe with silver embroideries covered her body.

Ilea assumed based on the slight armor, higher level, and her body language that the Minister at least had some real battle experience. Her face was schooled but the slight tension in her body suggested at least some awareness of the monster in front of her.

“Lovely office you have here,” Ilea commented, breaking the eye contact to look outside. “And an even better view.”

The Minister smiled. “The lengths I went to for this view,” she said and shook her head lightly. “I’m glad you could make it. Claire informed us of your coming but I hadn’t expected you so early in the morning,” she said and gestured to the comfortable looking chair in front of the large wooden desk.

Ilea accepted the invitation. “I’m sure neither of us needs a lot of sleep anymore.”

“And yet it’s still such a wonderful thing, isn’t it? If only there was less work and more competent people to assign it to,” the woman said. “I heard of your plans to visit Halstein. Perhaps it’s too late, but I should warn you about the Corinth Order. Their reputation and current state suggest motives that may endanger both you and your allies.”

“I appreciate it,” Ilea said. “But that’s already been dealt with.”

If the woman knew about her planned visit, she would surely be informed of what happened in Halstein within the week.

The Minister blinked and nodded lightly. “I can offer you five gold pieces for any information you’re willing to share on that subject.”

“I’ll let Claire decide what exactly my information should be worth. If you’re willing to accept that trade?” Ilea said. If the Order of Balance wanted to make gold with healing, she would just deflect their attacks at her most efficient shield and weapon. Claire Russel.

The woman smiled and leaned back. “Tea?” she asked, summoning a kettle.

“Gladly,” Ilea said.

Two cups appeared on the desk, the woman filling them with meticulous care. “Brewed perfectly. Curious how some storage items manage to keep such things frozen in time.”

“It’s a great benefit,” Ilea said, using some ash to get the cup. *Maybe one day I’ll be able to understand what’s happening within them.*

“I can assume then that any discussion of specifics will be left with your southern ally?” the woman asked.

“Depends on what specifics exactly. She doesn’t speak for me, and I don’t speak for her. But if you mean assets and trade, then yes,” Ilea answered.

“I understand. I’ll have to find time for a visit then. Both to talk to her and the Headmaster of your Sentinels. Can I assume your announcement to focus on adventuring teams and hunting monsters to be sincere?” the woman asked.

“We don’t train healers to stay behind walls. But I can’t speak for all Sentinels. For now I think all of them would find that prospect both boring and a waste of their time. And I don’t think that will change with future recruits,” Ilea said. “Your name is curious. How should I address you?”

“Genesis is perfectly fine. Is Lady Lilith acceptable to you?” the woman asked.

“Just Lilith is fine,” Ilea said.

“Lilith then. I’m glad to hear it from you personally. Then I believe there won’t be any major issues between our Order and your organization. And should any arise nonetheless, I’m sure we can solve them through various agreements and non violent ways,” Genesis said.

Ilea smiled. “I’m sure we can. As long as you don’t hunt healers or let people die because they can’t pay for your services.”

Genesis looked at her for a moment. “Curious. I hadn’t thought you a humanitarian. No member of the Order of Balance can speak for all the healers trained and associated with us. There surely has been death and suffering caused by those refusing services. Though most people who choose to become healers don’t do so for monetary gain alone. Internal rules forbid such actions but it’s impossible to survey everyone at all times, I’m sure you understand that.”

“What did you think of me then?” Ilea asked, curious to hear what someone in the woman’s position had to say about Lilith. “And of course. If you don’t promote such actions or actively ignore them, you’re already worlds ahead of others.”

Genesis sipped on her tea, keeping her light blue eyes on Ilea. “What did I think of you... well I didn’t think you’d be interested in an old Minister’s opinion. Many who choose the path of adventuring don’t care for much other than themselves, let alone those who manage to join the Shadow’s Hand. There are outliers of course, and you are one of them, in more than one way.

“There are many stories and songs about you. Bardish drivel, tales to propagate one thing or the other, paid for by interest groups unknown to me. Or perhaps all true, understated even? I thought

many things, but I knew nothing until you entered this very room. Now that I see you... that I perceive the magic flowing through your veins. Well, let's say I doubt the three marks shown to me by my skill are an illusion. Which makes me think the stories are but a fraction of your true exploits."

Ilea smirked, sipping on her tea. "Delicious mix," she said. "You don't seem to be bothered much by that fact. Can I assume you've seen other three marks before?"

"Thank you. It's a past time of mine. Sadly much of the city's reserves were plundered or burned down during the siege. It takes years and years to cultivate some of these herbs," she said and sighed. "To answer your questions, no. I haven't, though I wouldn't share that information with you for free. My lack of mindless terror stems from the fact that you seem a human being with the capacity for thought and communication. Quite unlike some of this Empire's high ranking nobility, as well as some Ministers of the very Order I find myself a part of."

The woman leaned back and sighed, closing her eyes as she took another sip. "To an extent it's refreshing. It's been a long time since someone made me feel this way. No matter what I would do, it feels like I'm standing in front of a creature entirely beyond my own ability. So far so that this conversation lacks entirely in tension. We both know the position we are in, from a more primal and magical perspective. You chose to adhere to the rules set by our societies and morals, I thank you for that. A lot of unnecessary suffering could've been prevented over the centuries if humans of high power had chosen to do the same."

Ilea smiled. "I'm not a monster, despite the numerous allegations. Nor am I a god or queen for that matter, and I never will be."

"It usually depends on perspective, though I must admit that I'm impressed. You must have something in your heart that prevents the corruption brought by power," Genesis said, looking out onto the lake.

A love for good food, Ilea thought, not entirely sure she hadn't been corrupted in some ways already. But she supposed if she didn't start slaughtering entire populations on a conquering march for Sentinel dominance, she shouldn't be too hard on herself.

"What keeps you from turning into a mindless beast?" Ilea asked, following the woman's gaze.

"Order. Love. Tea. Not entirely in that order. I once fought creatures in the wild. Everyone close to three hundred did. It's a rush, one that could take over quickly back within a city's walls. Why should orders matter when they come from someone far below one's capabilities? Why should laws be obeyed when the entire guard of a settlement could not stop me? I fear the day when someone with no purpose or reason but their own self reaches heights such as yours," Genesis mused.

"There are those who would intervene," Ilea said.

"Like we intervened in Baralia? How many tens of thousands died?" she asked, both remaining quiet for a while. Genesis sipped from her tea again before she spoke once more. "Apologies, Lilit. I assure you I don't normally bore my guests with such thoughts. But sitting across a being such as you, it didn't seem to matter. Thank you, for not ridiculing an old woman. Even though you may very well be older than me. I accept the terms then, whatever information you have on the Corinth Order, I would like to hear it. And we will compensate your organization in turn. Or Ravenhall itself, if that is your wish."

Ilea waved her off. "Just mention it to Claire," she said and quickly outlined what had happened in Halstein.

“The Speaker... is dead. That may change things. With Donnavon and Mateo in a position to make decisions. I have only little information on Bryce but if what you say of him is true, it may be incredibly beneficial,” Genesis said. “Thank you.”

“Beneficial for whom?” Ilea asked with a grin, leaning back as she finished her cup of tea.

“For us of course. And every healer in Elos. But mostly us. The Corinth were the main reason our Order hasn’t managed to expand much in Kroll or the independent cities in the west, though the latter hasn’t been much of a problem since the Elven attacks,” she said in a dry tone.

“Few options to expand into ruins. Riverwatch, Stormbreach, and Dawntree should be doing fine however,” Ilea said.

“Riverwatch prefers to train their own healers. Though not to the benefit of their population. Perhaps we can come to better arrangements now that they’re so closely connected to an independent Ravenhall. Dawntree won’t accept another Healing Order within its natural walls for a generation or two, and Stormbreach... has their own *Order*,” she said.

How much does she know, I wonder?

Ilea didn’t know which she thought more beneficial, the Order of Balance or the Order of Benevolence. “I was wondering why there weren’t more adventuring healers if you don’t actively prevent yours from joining any teams,” Ilea asked.

“Convenience mostly. Healers who join our Order have to work within our temples for many years. Lucrative positions, mind you. Most find it difficult to let go of the prestige and comforts that come with being a healer,” Genesis said, gesturing around herself to underline the point. “And those who don’t either die in one dungeon or the other, join the guard or military, or they return after seeing a little too much violence and death.”

“I admire your wish to support adventurers with capable healers, and to train healers that can hold their own in the first place. But I can’t imagine the gold you invested into this endeavor. I hope it doesn’t turn out a massive failure,” the woman said.

Ilea couldn’t help but laugh.

“Did I offend you?” Genesis asked.

“No, no. I like your bluntness,” Ilea said.

“Is my suggestion so ridiculous then? We have both seen the creatures out there, you to an extent I could likely not even comprehend,” Genesis said.

“You haven’t met a Sentinel yet, have you?” she asked.

The woman shook her head. “I’ve only heard of a few individuals taking on missions already.”

“You might understand it once you meet them,” Ilea said.